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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3423
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000314

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STATE FOR SCA, SCA/INS, SCA/RA, DRL AND PM (S MULL)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: EMBASSY DISCUSSES CHILD SOLDIERS
ROADMAP WITH GSL AND UNICEF

REF: COLOMBO 279

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador and DCM called on Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona on March 24 to discuss Embassy

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suggestions for a roadmap to address child soldiers. Ambassador recommended any progress on the issue be verified by UNICEF and noted that the Embassy would remain engaged in the process, liaising with the GSL, TMVP and UNICEF. In response, Kohona said the GSL is focused on demobilizing child soldiers, but has encountered some stumbling blocks in their efforts to address the issue, such as a lack of resources for rehabilitating the children. Nonetheless, Kohona was optimistic that progress could be achieved. DCM and Pol Chief met with UNICEF on March 25 to discuss the feasibility of such an action plan. UNICEF Resident Representative Phillipe Duamelle said the USG should push the GSL to obtain the release of as many TMVP child soldiers as possible immediately. He warned that GSL motivation may diminish after the May 10 provincial council elections in the East, in which the TMVP is competing. UNICEF has assessed that the majority of child soldiers could be returned home to their families immediately. Post will strongly urge the GSL to provide a list of child soldiers and their locations to UNICEF as soon as possible and to cooperate with UNICEF plans to demobilize them. End Summary.

Ambassador Proposes an Action Plan on Child Soldiers

12. (C) Ambassador and DCM called on Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona on March 24 to discuss Embassy suggestions for a roadmap to address child soldiers. Ambassador acknowledged the GSL's zero tolerance policy on child soldiers and noted that an action plan to demobilize child soldiers would help convince the USG that Sri Lanka is serious about addressing this issue. Ambassador suggested that an effective, achievable action plan would include:

-a statement by the TMVP rejecting the use of child soldiers,
-the release of those child soldiers that can be immediately
returned to their families, and
-a plan for the release of those child soldiers who would
need more extensive rehabilitation.

13. (C) Ambassador recommended that these benchmarks be
verified by UNICEF, the internationally accepted authority on
such matters. He added that the Embassy would remain engaged
in the process by meeting directly with TMVP leader
Pillaiyan, liaising with UNICEF, and implementing upcoming
stabilization projects in the East, some of which include
rehabilitation services for child soldiers.

GSL Notes Challenges, But Remains Optimistic

14. (C) In response, Kohona said the GSL is focused on this
issue, but has encountered some stumbling blocks in their
efforts to address child soldiers. Many have nowhere to go
once they are released, he said, and the GSL's rehabilitation
centers are already overburdened. Many child soldiers are
forced to remain with paramilitary groups because their
families are too poor to take them back. Some children want
to remain in the TMVP, he said, because the group is no
longer engaged in fighting and offers them a sense of
belonging and protection, "similar to the Boy Scouts." He
argued that returning trained fighters to their homes without
teaching them life skills would lead to disruption in the
villages. He also cautioned that released child soldiers
might be recruited by the LTTE. Kohona noted that he has
recently asked UNICEF to bring in counselors and other
resources to assist with demobilizing child soldiers.

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15. (C) Nonetheless, Kohona was optimistic that progress
could be achieved. He noted that former TMVP leader Karuna
had given assurances in the past that all child soldiers
would be released, and that current TMVP leader Pillaiyan was
even more likely to actually do it. He claimed the numbers
of child soldiers have gone down recently and will further
decrease as the GSL ensures that all paramilitary groups in
Sri Lanka are disarmed. (Note: this may be true for Sri
Lanka overall but is not accurate concerning TMVP child
soldiers who are in government-controlled areas. The rate of
recruitment may have declined, but overall numbers have not.)
He also noted that the GSL has previous experience with
demobilizing militants. In 1971, he said, the GSL put 35,000
JVP militants in rehabilitation centers, some for as long as
3 years, with great success. Despite this confidence, he
asked that Sri Lanka not be held to a 60 day cutoff on
showing progress, noting that 60 days was too short a time.

UNICEF Urges Embassy to Maintain Pressure

16. (C) DCM and Pol Chief met UNICEF on March 25 to discuss
the feasibility of such an action plan. UNICEF Resident
Representative Phillipe Duamelle said the U.S. Human Rights
Report and decision to cut off military assistance because of
the child soldier issue have had an enormous impact on the
GSL, noting increased openness and willingness on the part of
the GSL to cooperate with UNICEF on the issue of child
soldiers. Duamelle expressed UNICEF's appreciation for USG
efforts and asked for continued U.S. pressure on the
government. He said UNICEF sees a window of opportunity
opening up to try and get the TMVP children released, but
felt the window would close again after the May 10 provincial
council election. He said the USG should push the GSL to
release as many children as possible immediately, and not
settle for less. According to UNICEF's latest figures (as of
February 29, 2008), the TMVP has 161 child soldiers under 18
and another 74 that have reached the age of 18 since
recruitment. UNICEF recorded 3 new recruitments and 2
re-recruitments in January, but none in February.

17. (C) Duamelle recommended that the GSL and/or TMVP provide UNICEF with a list of child soldiers to be demobilized, including locations. UNICEF would then make sure that the necessary measures are put in place to do so, he said. UNICEF is currently working with the Secretary of Justice's committee on child soldiers to develop a package to help reintegrate child soldiers into their communities, including preparing families to receive them, returning to formal or informal education, and vocational training. Duamelle also noted that UNICEF has refurbished the GSL's child soldier rehabilitation center in Ambepussa. He said it can hold about 200 former child soldiers, but currently has far fewer. (Note: Duamelle insisted Kohona's information on the overcrowding of GSL facilities was incorrect.) He acknowledged that the facility needs more qualified personnel to deal with the children. UNICEF's assessment, however, is that many, if not the majority, of child soldiers could return directly home to their families. Most are short term recruits, he said, who have served only a year or year and a half. Most would not experience reintegration problems, but he admitted some concern about the possibility of LTTE re-recruitment or retaliation.

18. (C) Duamelle said he had met recently with Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, Kohona, and others and planned

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to meet with TMVP Mayor of Batticaloa Padmini Prabhakaran in early April to follow up. UNICEF planned eventually to meet directly with Pillaiyan. Duamelle pointed out the need to be even-handed and make sure that LTTE child soldiers are also released. He acknowledged that this will be more challenging since the GSL has the right to hold them for interrogation. The LTTE knows this, he said, and may be reluctant to let the remaining children go for fear they

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might reveal too much.

TMVP CLAIMS IT ONLY HAS TWENTY CHILDREN

19. (C) TMVP spokesman Azad Maulana claimed on March 26 that the TMVP now has only twenty children in its ranks. He said a high-level GSL delegation will meet them in Batticaloa on March 30 for a needs assessment. Maulana indicated that the TMVP was reluctant to release children to international organizations, including UNICEF, on the grounds that these organizations "do not take responsibility for the long-term well being of children handed over to them." He added that the TMVP political faction was willing to disarm as soon as they were "given a guarantee on our security."

ACTION PLAN FOR GSL AND MISSION

10. (SBU) After discussion with both GSL officials and UNICEF, Embassy will employ the following criteria and benchmarks to develop a recommendation as to whether the GSL has taken effective measures (as stipulated in Section 699C of the FY08 Foreign Appropriations Act) to end the practice of using child soldiers in the territory it controls (note internal numbering):

60-day Action Plan for GSL:

1) GSL intervenes with the TMVP and ensures that effective immediately, no further children are recruited or re-recruited by the TMVP in government-controlled territory. The benchmark will be cases documented and registered by UNICEF. It appears that currently this benchmark is being met. It is not material whether parents or others report the cases to the police or other authorities. UNICEF figures for April should be available by mid-May.

2) The government secures release by the TMVP of a significant number of child soldiers by May 10. Exceptions:
- Children whose families can not be identified
- Those who need special counseling because of severe trauma and
- Those who would clearly be vulnerable to recruitment or retaliation by the LTTE if released.
The benchmark will be documentation of the releases by UNICEF. The government should carry out this step prior to the May 10 election. It will be critical that UNICEF be able to confirm that the children were not subsequently re-recruited by TMVP.

3) The GSL works with UNICEF, the Embassy, and other stakeholders to produce a credible, time-bound plan for the release of the remaining child soldiers. The plan should include necessary interventions and programs to ensure the children's future well-being, including psychological support, help with reintegration, and vocational training for the older children. The plan should contain realistic, achievable benchmarks and specific available funding sources including GSL, UNICEF, USG, and other donor programs. Embassy will work closely with the Committee headed by the Secretary of Justice, UNICEF, and other stakeholders to

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produce a credible and realistic plan.

60-day Action Plan for U.S. Mission:

1) Continued high-level advocacy with Foreign Ministry, Ministry for Human Rights, and Interministerial Committee led by Secretary of Justice.

2) Embassy will work closely with the Committee headed by the Secretary of Justice, UNICEF, and other stakeholders to

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produce a credible and realistic demobilization plan.

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3) Targeted interventions with non-government actors, including a meeting between Ambassador and TMVP leader Pillaiyan.

4) Submission of 1210 proposal including DDR programs, with early emphasis on disarming/rehabilitation of child soldiers. (Note: this has been conveyed to SCA.)

5) Discussions with potential partners in rehabilitation/reintegration activities, possibly including site visits by Embassy/USAID personnel to places where child soldiers are currently located or where rehabilitation programs could take place.

11. (C) COMMENT: Post is encouraged by the optimism shown by both the GSL and UNICEF. However, the TMVP's evident lack of candor on the number of children in its ranks is troubling, since it likely means it will continue to play cat-and-mouse with UNICEF to avoid releasing most of its children under arms. The effort to release the child soldiers might then degenerate into a numbers game. On the other hand, Kohona's sometimes faulty information more likely indicates that the MFA, not fully informed about the issue, is still stuck in its defensive diplomacy strategy on child soldiers. We hope the more forward-leaning stance we found among other GSL interlocutors will continue. Embassy agrees with UNICEF that the time for action is now, in order to take full advantage of the brief window of opportunity before the May 10 Provincial Council elections. Post will strongly urge the GSL to provide a list of child soldiers and their locations to UNICEF as soon as possible and to cooperate with UNICEF plans to demobilize them.

BLAKE